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AUTHOR Gaustad, Joan
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ABSTRACT

Nongraded primary education is the practice of teaching children of different ages and ability levels together, without dividing them or the curriculum into steps labeled by "grade" designations. Changing from graded to nongraded structure requires a major investment of time, energy, and commitment on the part of teachers and administrators. This publication focuses on the complex and delicate process of transition from graded to nongraded organization, presenting examples at local and state levels. The first chapter summarizes the elements of successful change, with special emphasis on the psychological aspects of change. Chapter 2 takes a close look at how teachers in one school are making the transition. The different approaches of three Oregon school districts to nongraded primary education are explored in chapter 3. Chapter 4 focuses on the process of transition in an entire state or province. Finally, chapter 5 discusses the options school boards have for exploring nongraded primary education or implementing a state mandate in their own districts. A list of 17 persons interviewed is appended. (24 references) (MLF)

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Making the Transition from Graded to Nongraded Primary Education

Joan Gaustad

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Preface

The approach of the year 2000 has served as a catalyst for a reexamination of America's schools. Children now attending kindergarten through third grade will graduate from high school after the year 2000; are they learning the skills and knowledge they will need to be successful citizens of the 21st century? And if the answer is no, what changes should be made?

Educational reforms are being proposed and enacted across the continent, from the local to the national level. The Canadian province of British Columbia and the states of Kentucky and Oregon have recently passed comprehensive education reform legislation. In each of these education reform packages, nongraded primary education is a key element.

Last month's OSSC Bulletin, *Nongraded Education: Mixed-Age, Integrated, and Developmentally Appropriate Education for Primary Children,* examined the history, research base, and current practice of nongraded primary education. This Bulletin focuses on the complex and delicate process of transition from graded to nongraded organization, presenting examples at local and state levels. Then it concludes this sequence of two Bulletins by discussing the options available to school boards with respect to nongraded primary education.

Joan Gaustad, the author of this Bulletin, received her B.A. in Psychology from Grinnell College in Grinnell, Iowa, and her M.A. in Clinical Psychology from John F. Kennedy University in Orinda, California. She currently works as a freelance writer in Eugene, Oregon. She also wrote *Schools Respond to Gangs and Violence*, the May 1991 OSSC Bulletin.

Introduction

Any major change is a stressful and difficult process, for institutions as well as for individuals. The transition from graded to nongraded primary education is a major change indeed. Not only does it require teachers to master new instructional techniques, but it requires changes in school organization and a basic shift in educational philosophy.

What Is Nongraded Primary Education?

Nongraded primary education is the practice of teaching children of different ages and ability levels together, without dividing them or the curriculum into steps labeled by "grade" designations. The nongraded approach uses student diversity to advantage rather than regarding it as an impediment. Children grow socially and emotionally as well as intellectually as they work together on cooperative projects, help classmates who are younger and less able, and rely on older and more advanced peers when they need assistance themselves.

Current knowledge of the developmental stages of young children and of the different learning styles of individual students is taken into account in designing curriculum and planning instruction. Learning is active and integrated. Rather than passively taking in information, students typically use multiple senses to explore and solve problems, learning in contexts in which information is meaningful and relevant.

Rather than passing or failing at the end of a year, children make continuous progress through curriculum at their own individual rates. The use of letter grades is often replaced by alternative types of assessment, such as collections of student work and descriptive reports. Progress is evaluated with reference to general normative standards and to the student's previous work, rather than by comparison with classmates.

From this lengthy description, it is evident that "nongraded primary education" is an umbrella term that encompasses a number of different subcomponents. Several terms have been used to refer to the "nongraded approach" and its component elements, and disagreement exists over what label is best or most accurate. This Bulletin generally uses the label *nongraded* in order to conform with the usage in Oregon's recent education reform legislation.

Change: A Complex and Lengthy Process

Changing from graded to nongraded structure requires a major investment of time, energy, and commitment on the part of teachers and administrators. Fortunately, today's educators can benefit from the experiences of those who made earlier attempts, as well as from recent research on the process of change. The first chapter of this Bulletin summarizes the elements of successful change, with special emphasis on the psychological aspects of change.

Chapter 2 takes a close look at how teachers in one school are making the transition. The different approaches of three Oregon school districts to nongraded primary education are explored in chapter 3. Chapter 4 focuses on the process of transition in an entire state or province. Finally, chapter 5 discusses the options school boards have for exploring nongraded primary education or implementing a state mandate in their own districts.

Chapter 1

Elements of Successful Change

The elements of successful change appear to be similar at all levels, whether in one school or in an entire school system. Planners in larger systems often study research on change to prepare for implementation. Teachers and administrators at the local level often seem to "discover" the same elements by trial and error, simply by doing what feels comfortable to them.

This chapter begins by summarizing the elements of change shared by successfully implemented nongraded programs. Next, the psychological aspects of change are considered. Finally, the *concerns-based adoption model*, a model for change based on extensive research, is presented.

Successful Implementation of Nongraded Primary Education

Previous implementers of nongraded programs repeatedly describe the same elements crucial to success. This section summarizes these elements.

Informing and Educating Teachers and Parents

In a survey of thirty-four successful nongraded programs conducted in the fifties, Goodlad and Anderson (1987) found that administrators identified understanding of and support for nongrading by teachers and parents as the factors most crucial to the success of a program. Participants in programs that were discontinued "mentioned the lack of teacher cooperation and failure of teachers to give adequate explanation of the plans to parents as major causes for lack of success." Goodlad and Anderson concluded that

teacher understanding and enthusiasm are the keys to success, as teachers can then communicate this to parents.

A 1990-91 study of ten established nongraded primary programs, cosponsored by the Kentucky Education Association and the Appalachia Educational Laboratory, yielded similar results. "Lack of parent and teacher understanding and acceptance of the ungraded primary program concept" was most frequently reported as the biggest obstacle to overcome in establishing nongraded primary programs.

These conclusions are echoed by many educators and administrators. For example, Kantrowitz and Wingert (1989) report that staff at Olive School in Arlington Heights, Illinois, feel parent involvement is one reason the school has been able to maintain its nontraditional curriculum for twenty-two years.

> Teachers say they spend a lot of time educating parents about the teaching methods. "Parents always think school should be the way it was for them," says first-grade teacher Cathy Sauer. "As if everything else can change and progress but education. I find that parents want their children to like school, to get along with other children and to be good thinkers. When they see that happening, they become convinced."

Practical Training for Teachers

Teachers need to understand the theoretical foundations of nongraded primary education, but theory is not enough. Miller (1989) stresses that practical training in multiage teaching, including opportunities to observe effective models, is "critically important for success."

Although some teaching skills are effective in both single-grade and nongraded classrooms, different skills are also required. In addition, old single-grade expectations can create problems. Miller lists six "key instructional dimensions" in which multiage teaching differs from single-grade teaching: classroom organization, classroom management and discipline, instructional organization and curriculum, instructional delivery and grouping, self-directed learning, and peer tutoring. Teachers must be given opportunities to master these new tools through inservice training, peer coaching, and visits to observe established nongraded classrooms.

Advance Study and Planning

Educators quoted in the above-mentioned studies emphasized the importance of careful study and planning before starting to implement nongrading. Planners should examine a variety of different nongraded

programs and select from them the elements best suited to the needs of their particular school and community. Visits should be made to existing nongraded programs in other communities, and information brought back and discussed.

It is particularly important that teachers and parents be given sufficient time to consider nongrading and become comfortable with it. Changing to nongraded education is not a short-term, "quick-fix" project. It is a major change affecting all aspects of the educational system and must be give time to succeed.

Flexibility in Implementation

Just as the timeframe for implementation of nongraded education should remain flexible, so should the details of implementation. Adding a few new elements at a time generally works better than attempting to change the entire structure at once. Each new element should be evaluated and adjusted as program participants see how it works in practice, in their own unique circumstances.

Ownership by Staff and Parents

Teachers are more likely to support nongraded programs when they are involved in the process of planning and decision-making. The same is true for parents. Many schools with nongraded programs use some type of shared decision-making process, usually involving teachers and administrators, sometimes including parents as well.

Teachers involved in advance planning need to be given time for conducting research, making visits, and discussing and sharing information with other teachers. A large school district might place an interested teacher on special assignment for a year to do research and plan training for other teachers in the system. Or substitutes can be used to free a small group of teachers for planning and research.

Sometimes state grant money can take the financial burden off the district. However, teachers and parents involved in planning often contribute many unpaid hours once they become convinced of the value of nongrading.

Providing Ongoing Planning Time

Studies of nongraded programs unanimously agree that teaching multiage classes requires more preparation time. If team teaching is used, additional time is needed for team members to exchange information and plan cooperatively. This extra time for planning and consultation must be

made part of the official schedule to avoid teacher burnout.

"Any time there's something new, people will exert that extra bit of effort," said Shirley Gidley, specialist for the Oregon 21st Century Schools Council. "But when they find that three years down the line planning time is as great or greater, they say, 'whoa, maybe this isn't the way to go'."

Administrative and Community Support

Administrative requirements geared toward graded education, such as requirements for grade-level textbooks and accountability evaluation based on standardized testing, are major obstructions. Supportive administrators at the site and district level can help lessen the pressure on nongraded programs, but ideally state legislation would remove these impediments and encourage nongrading—an ideal that is approaching reality in a number of states. And, of course, additional funding facilitates the transition.

Community outreach and education are an important part of the transition process. "The public schools are still the public's schools, and the degree to which districts can successfully implement either a model or a mandated nongraded primary may depend on the degree to which it's successful in those communities," said Christopher L. Dudley, executive director of the Oregon School Boards Association. In addition to publicity aimed at parents and news media, Goodlad and Anderson recommend contacting any public and private agency that deals with youth—churches, libraries, youth groups, public health agencies. They even suggest contacting doctors and dentists to eliminate innocent but awkward queries of "What grade are you in, Johnnie?"

Psychological Aspects of Change

Psychological factors must be considered in planning transition, whatever the nature of the change. And the transition from graded to nongraded primary education is a major one. It affects everything from basic educational philosophy to details of day-to-day classroom activity, and it often clashes with deeply ingrained expectations.

Three Attitudes Toward Change

Carol Olson, primary teacher at Westmoreland School in Eugene, Oregon, divides teachers—and people in general—into three groups with respect to change. First come the "point runners," those always willing to jump in and try new things. Next are the cautious, who prefer to let others work out the problems, then come on board later "if it looks good."

Finally, inevitably, "you always have the people who are going to resist change. And they will be the very last to come on board. Or they will retire, or they will move to another profession, or they will move to another district where this isn't required, if it's too uncomfortable for them. Or they will continue to teach the way they have."

Change is stressful even for those who voluntarily pioneer, as is evident in the comments of the Westmoreland teachers in chapter 2. As Olson said, "Change is very difficult for people, period."

Emotional Investment in the System

John Thompson, director of policy services for the Kentucky School Boards Association, points out that teachers have a special emotional investment in the educational system. "Most teachers became teachers because they enjoyed what happened to them in school," said Thompson. "So if you have teachers who basically enjoyed what happened to them in school, to change what they're expected to do requires a great change in their thinking, in their attitudes, in their approach to what they're doing."

One might expect educating new teachers in the nongraded approach to be easier than reeducating veterans with well-established teaching styles. But according to professor of education Carol Lauritzen, preservice teachers still bring with them the "whole history of their own experience in school. And that tends to be the way they're inclined to teach rather than what we tell them they ought to do." Changing preconceptions about "how schools ought to be" may be considerably more difficult than teaching new information or techniques.

The Curve of Suffering

David Wright, professor of education and a member of the Oregon Nongraded Primary Task Force, warns any district considering nongraded education to be prepared for what Corvallis School District educators call "the curve of suffering."

> You start out thinking, "Ah, this change is great, this'll be wonderful." Then you start seeing the impact it has on you and you start to suffer. It gets worse and worse until it peaks. And then once you get past that peak, it starts going downhill.

Change has an impact on everyone: teachers, administrators, and parents. But its impact is unevenly distributed, said Wright.

> For some people there's very little suffering, because this is something they already believe in, and are knowledgeable about, and for

other people there's a lot of suffering, because they just can't imagine doing this, and they're dragging their feet as hard as they can.

Mary Johnson, elementary curriculum coordinator for the Corvallis School District, agrees that change can be painful, especially in the early stages. Teachers will be awkward as they begin to use developmentally appropriate techniques or any other innovation. "It's like learning to play golf—you're clumsy when you're learning a new skill."

However, Johnson believes that differences in receptivity to change are not necessarily a question of willingness or unwillingness to improve. "Some people are more flexible than others," she said, "and some are able to change more readily." Just as children differ in their rates and patterns of learning, so do adults.

In addition, Johnson points out that it usually takes longer for adults to change "because they have so much prior learning, and they have to synthesize it all."

Reinventing Nongrading

Piaget argued "that at each stage children do not copy what they encounter but actively construct reality out of their experiences with the environment" (David Elkind 1981). In examining nongraded primary programs, it appears this theory is true not only for children, but for adults and institutions as well.

Teachers at Eugene's Westmoreland School decided they needed to create their own "Westmoreland model" rather than replicate someone else's. The Beaverton School District is setting up its own pilots to gather data on what does and doesn't work in Beaverton, rather than depending on conclusions obtained from other districts' experiences. Kentucky is requiring each school to develop its own individual action plan, and the state stresses that variation may exist not just among schools, but among classrooms within the same school.

To successfully implement nongraded primary education, it may be necessary to provide each teacher with the means of reinventing it.

The Concerns-Based Adoption Model

Researchers at the Research and Development Center for Teacher Education, which is associated with the University of Texas at Austin, spent more than a decade studying the process of school change. After repeatedly observing unsuccessful attempts at change, they created the Concerns-Based Adoption Model (CBAM), a comprehensive model for change.

Mistaken Assumptions Create a Pattern of Failure

Shirley M. Hord and her colleagues (1987) describe the following disheartening pattern as typical of efforts to introduce innovation in American schools: A promising new program is introduced. Teachers are given a brief orientation and handed new texts or materials. Some teachers spend many extra hours struggling to master and implement the program. However, they are only partially successful due to the inadequate preparation and support they have received. Other teachers, unconvinced of the program's value, make only a halfhearted, superficial effort. Evaluation one year later reveals no difference in student achievement—which is not surprising since the program has not really been implemented. The district concludes the program is ineffective and drops it.

According to these researchers, the roots of this pattern of failure lie in mistaken assumptions about change. Administrators and policymakers often drastically underestimate the amount of time needed for an innovation to be fully implemented, as well as the amount of ongoing training and support teachers will require. In focusing on abstract policy goals, they ignore the individual differences, needs, and concerns of the men and women who are being asked to change.

In reality, say Hord and her colleagues, successfully implementing an innovation requires several years. Change will be successful only if attention is paid to the personal concerns of the individuals involved and the specific contexts in which they function. Their *concerns-based adoption model* (presented in the book *Taking Charge of Change*) is based on the assumption that "the single most important factor in any change process is the people who will be most affected by the change."

Moving Through Stages of Concern: A Developmental Process

Long-range policy goals focus on the effects of an innovation on students. However, in the beginning the individuals affected by the change are preoccupied with more immediate concerns. The researchers describe the change process in individuals as developmental in nature.

Typically, *self-concerns* predominate in the early stages of change. Teachers want to know how the program works and how they will be personally affected. For example, they may be concerned that they have difficulty learning to use the new program and will be negatively judged for making mistakes. At this stage, inservice training that focuses on the end result is not very helpful. It may even "intensify personal concerns by confronting teachers with increased expectations."

As teachers begin using an innovation, *task concerns* come to the fore. The focus is on how to effectively manage time and organize unfamil-

iar materials. The extra time and effort involved in learning a new program can be discouraging, and if teachers are not provided with encouragement and practical assistance at this stage, they may stop trying to master the innovation and return to older, more comfortable patterns.

Once teachers feel comfortable using the new techniques, their concerns will focus on the *impact* of the changes on their students. At this point, their concerns match those of the planners.

Hord and her colleagues emphasize that it is normal and natural for individuals to have these concerns:

> There is nothing inherently good or bad about a particular stage or pattern of concerns. As an analogy, a chronological age of 16 years is not necessarily better or worse than an age of 6 or 26. But we do not interact with a teenager in the same way as with a 6- or 26-year-old. So it should be with concerns. Our interactions with a person who has high personal concerns may be quite different from those with someone with high consequence concerns, but neither person or Stage of Concern is better or worse than the other.
>
> Movement through the stages of concern cannot be forced, but, with appropriate support and assistance, it can be aided. At the same time, a lack of assistance or the wrong kind of support can interfere with developmental changes in concerns.

In nongraded education, the focus is on the needs of the learner—the child. In CBAM, the focus of the change process is also the learner, in this case the teacher. It seems appropriate that a "developmentally appropriate" process is necessary for the success of both.

Tools for Planning and Managing Change

CBAM includes several valuable tools to help plan and manage the complex process of change. Innovation Configurations are used to identify and describe the patterns of an innovation adopted by different teachers. The seven Stages of Concern provide a framework in which to identify the concerns of teachers and indicate what types of support and assistance are appropriate, both for individuals and for school communities. Levels of Use help change facilitators identify to what extent an innovation is actually being implemented.

CBAM also examines the role of effective change facilitators and how teams of change facilitators can share responsibilities. It provides a checklist of actions that support change and shows how these actions can be combined into a comprehensive game plan.

Hord and her colleagues assert that change strategies initiated from "top-down" and "bottom-up" can both succeed, as long as teachers are provided with sufficient support and assistance.

Chapter 2

Transition at a Single Site: Westmoreland Elementary School

Most nongraded programs in the past have been the result of a small group of highly motivated teachers becoming interested in nongrading and working to create such a program in their own school. The experiences of primary teachers at Westmoreland Elementary School in Eugene, Oregon, provide an example of the graded-to-nongraded transition process within an individual school.

Dianne Gilliand, Carol Olson, and Terry Snyder, three of the six members of the Westmoreland "primary team," described their exploration of nongrading during an afterschool interview in Olson's classroom.

Rainbow Day

The six Westmoreland primary teachers first experimented with multiage grouping while implementing a new art program. They designated Friday afternoons "Rainbow Day," mixing all K-2 students and dividing them into Red, Green, Purple, Orange, and Blue groups. Each teacher taught one part of each art lesson, and the Rainbow groups rotated through the classrooms to complete the entire sequence.

"We found the kids really enjoyed it," explained Olson. "They had a chance to work with all the other teachers, and the teachers had a chance to work with all the kids; we got to know each other. So the following year we decided to expand it."

The MID Program

During the second year, the teachers decided to combine multiage grouping with the integrated curriculum promoted by the district's "Education 2000" plan. They added science, social studies, and health issues and organized units around themes. The changes in the primary program were formalized with a new name: the "MID Program," short for Multiage, Integrated, and Developmentally Appropriate. Rainbow Days were increased to two afternoons per week.

The team experimented with different cycles. First, each teacher spent one week with a color group, rotating to another group the following week. Feeling two afternoons wasn't enough time with each group, the team tried rotating every two weeks, which gave them four afternoons with each color group. Finally they dropped back to three Rainbow Days per two-week period—Tuesday and Thursday of the first week plus the following Tuesday, leaving the extra Thursday afternoon free to allow for special events. The teachers felt three ninety-minute sessions with each group gave them enough time to comfortably cover each lesson. The rest of the time, students remained in their home classrooms.

Now in the third year of the MID program, the primary team is currently continuing this three-afternoon cycle. The teachers plan to gradually expand the MID approach into the rest of curriculum, said Olson, "slowly working into where each of us will probably be working with multiage children most of the time." They will undoubtedly experiment with other schedules as they continue making the transition.

The most recent change in the ongoing process is one of terminology. Carol Olson, formerly designated as a "first-grade" teacher, now teaches a multiage class of six- and seven-year-olds; next year the age range will expand to Terry Snyder's former "second-grade" class, now described as multiage seven through eight; next year he, too, will teach ages six through eight. Dianne Gilliand's class, which was an experimental K-1 "junior first" class when Rainbow Day was first created, is now designated simply as multiage five through six. This change is aimed at helping teachers and students break the graded-education "mindset" as they continue their progress into nongrading.

Creating the Westmoreland Model

According to Snyder, when the Westmoreland primary team first began studying nongraded education, their impulse was to "jump on a bandwagon" and adopt a program developed by a well-respected author. "There was one point where we were all ready, we almost did it—and we got down

to the real nitty gritty, and said, 'Now, wait a minute! That's her, and this is us'."

"That's where one of the fear attacks set in," added Gilliand. "Wait a minute.... I don't know if I could live every day with that! How do I incorporate that into the way I feel comfortable teaching?"

The five teachers reconsidered and changed their strategy. They gradually constructed a custom-fit program, adding new elements (gleaned from reading and visits to other schools) as they discovered what worked for them and for their students. The process was intensely personal and sometimes delicate, said Gilliand. They felt it was important that no team member feel "offended or put upon, or forced into doing something." She said, "We've moved very slowly, and everybody has managed to stay in harmony with each other. We haven't had any dissention and it has brought us a lot closer together as a working staff."

"What we're trying to accomplish is making a Westmoreland model," Snyder explained.

> We're not trying to take a model program from somewhere else and plant it in our school. All the people on our team are seasoned veterans with strong styles of their own.... We tried to look at the concepts and the goals of developmentally appropriate multiage classrooms, and make a model that fits our school and our parents and our teachers, and uses all of their strengths.

The three teachers clearly admire and respect each other's differing strong points. Olson described Gilliand's art projects in glowing terms. "I wish I had the talent this lady does with her children in art. And with our multigrade program, my children will have opportunities to work with her. The quality of work that comes out of her room is *phenomenal*."

In return, Gilliand admires Olson's classroom management skills. "You can hear a pin drop anyplace. If I could develop half of that skill, I would keep my door open more!" she said with a laugh.

Snyder described his own energetic delivery as totally different from the others. He concluded, "I don't think there's a better or a worse. And the children, we think, are the beneficiaries of the diversity of these teaching styles."

Keeping Parents Informed

Located between higher- and lower-income neighborhoods near a housing complex for married university students, Westmoreland school has a diverse body of students and parents representing nineteen nations and all socioeconomic levels. The primary team uses a variety of means to communicate with parents. In addition to periodic parent conferences, school

newsletters and special monthly primary newsletters are sent home with the children. Parent meetings are arranged through the local parent-teacher organization. The highlight of a recent meeting was the showing of a video-tape on developmentally appropriate practices.

These avenues of communication existed before the MID Program came into being, says Olson. The primary team simply "enhanced them, and made sure that the word got out" about the new program elements. In line with district policy and recent state legislation, the school also recently formed a "21st Century Schools Council," a site committee composed of parents, staff, and administrators that assists in planning school activities.

Help in Making the Transition

The Westmoreland teachers did not make the transition to nongrading unaided. A grant from the Oregon Department of Education paid for substitute teachers, which freed team members to visit other nongraded programs and to read, think, discuss, and plan together.

School visits were valuable in several says, said Olson. On some visits they saw useful new techniques they wanted to take back and try at Westmoreland. Sometimes it was validating to see other schools successfully using methods similar to their own. And other times, Olson said, team members felt, "Hey, we really must be doing well, because we like what we're doing even better."

The teachers' decision to explore nongrading was influenced both by the school district's "Education 2000" curriculum goals and by the Oregon Educational Act for the 21st Century, also known as the Katz Bill, which is discussed further in chapter 4. Knowing that nongraded education might eventually be mandated by the state, said Olson, the Westmoreland teachers felt it would "be more empowering to build our own program, kind of set the standard... rather than just sit back and wait until it gets developed and gets passed down to us."

According to Gilliand, it was Snyder's enthusiasm that inspired them to actually apply for the grant. Gilliand chuckled as she recalled their feelings about the process. "We decided, 'All right, let's all jump in and we'll just go for it.' And then when we got it, we all went, 'Oh, my gosh! Now we really have to do all this stuff we talked about!' It was scary."

Westmoreland recently received an additional $10,000 as one of eleven Oregon schools awarded grants to develop model developmentally appropriate nongraded primary programs.

Chapter 3

Transition at the District Level

In Oregon, district awareness of nongrading has been heightened by the passage of the Oregon Educational Act for the 21st Century This legislation requires schools to explore nongraded primary education and may later mandate it. Many districts were already considering nongrading, and the state's action has stimulated others to do so.

The policies of three Oregon school districts illustrate three different approaches to nongraded primary education. The Beaverton School District, while maintaining a relatively neutral attitude, is open to nongrading as an option and supports school sites interested in exploring it. The Eugene School District has set clear curriculum goals that include the elements of nongrading, and the district vigorously encourages its schools to move toward those goals. The Corvallis School District has mandated developmentally appropriate practice in all its schools, but is leaving it up to each building whether or not to make nongraded structure part of its plan to achieve that goal.

Beaverton: Educational Options Include Nongrading

According to Deborah Sommer, director of curriculum and instruction for the Beaverton School District, exploring nongraded primary education is just one part of the district's ongoing effort to diversify programs at all age levels, with the goal of providing "educational options" for students.

Beaverton places a high value on the element of choice. "We're not interested in a mandate, either at the central level or at the building level," Sommer emphasizes. "Even within the school there needs to be an opportunity for parents or students who choose not to participate" in a nongraded

program. If the district finds nongraded classes work better than traditional classes, it may eventually implement nongrading more broadly, but in the meantime it is adopting a neutral stance.

Providing Informational Workshops

In August 1991, just before school started, Sommer organized a two-day "elementary miniconference" at which representatives of neighboring school districts were invited to share information about innovative programs. The multiage classroom was one of four topics presented "within the context of exciting things happening within elementary schools, and providing more choices and opportunities for kids."

Later in the fall term, the district sponsored two evening workshops for principals and teachers specifically interested in multiage grouping. The workshops were led by Sandy Evans, a curriculum and instruction specialist for the district who had researched nongrading and visited model programs in British Columbia and other parts of the Pacific Northwest. The workshops stressed that changing to nongrading would be a major, complex change requiring long-term commitment.

Schools interested in being considered as pilot sites were then invited to submit proposals to the district.

Criteria for Pilot Programs

One of the main selection criteria will be strong commitment on the part of school staff. Proposed pilot programs should build on groundwork already laid within the school, says Sommer, rather than being a new or impulsive idea. Proposals should also show how the school would support the project in the long term if central funding were discontinued. Other prerequisites include plans for extensive parent involvement and a well-developed assessment component.

The district is particularly interested in having a variety of different nongraded models, in order to see which elements are effective under different circumstances. "We're very interested in gathering data on what's working and not working," adds Sommer. The district appears to want to gather its own evidence on the effectiveness of nongrading rather than be dependent on information from the state. One Beaverton site, Beaver Acres Elementary, has received a state grant for a model nongraded primary program, but that is in addition to the district's own pilot programs.

Evans is currently developing training programs for staff at the selected sites. She is also using her staff development expertise at the state level, having been named to Oregon's Non-Graded Primary Task Force.

Responding to Interest from Above and Below

Nongraded primary education was not part of a "strategic plan," said Sommer. Rather, the administration was responding to interest from both above and below. The school board had asked the district to take steps in the direction indicated by the Katz bill, though it had not directed specific actions. At the same time, elementary school staff were expressing considerable interest in the subject.

"The activity was orchestrated out of here," Sommer said, "but it was in response to multiple requests. We simply put together some workshops to give them some information, and came up with this proposal process, recognizing that with limited resources we couldn't support every school that might want to try a pilot."

Ironically, the very openness of Beaverton's approach has been a stumbling block for some teachers and administrators. "Traditionally, we have been a top-down district," said Evans, "and the site-based staff development and site-based management, and the idea that people can be flexible in their curriculum and their programs, is new. And it's very difficult for some people to understand the changes and to feel comfortable with them."

Eugene: Decentralization Encourages Exploration

The Eugene School District is extremely decentralized, says Martha Harris, director for curriculum and instruction. The district tries to create a vision of the future, set general goals, and encourage schools to move in the desired direction, but allows sites to decide how and when to change.

The Education 2000 Report

According to Harris, the 1983 publication of *A Nation At Risk* stimulated Eugene, like many other American communities, to examine its secondary-level education. A team of seventeen teachers studied Eugene's high schools and produced a report that laid the groundwork for a five-year improvement plan. This high school study was felt to be so valuable that a second elementary study was commissioned.

During the 1984-85 school year Superintendent Margaret Nichols appointed a ten-member committee composed of teachers, parents, and administrators to "conduct a study of Eugene's elementary program and prepare a report that would suggest the directions for elementary schools in the coming decade to the year 2000" (Martha Harris 1988). Committee members exhaustively reviewed current research, six subcommittees conducted public hearings, and 750 individuals and families completed written

surveys that had been distributed in the community.

Education 2000: Designing Our Future, published in 1988, made forty-three recommendations for improving curriculum, instruction, organization, and structure. The recommendations included many components of nongraded education: integrated curriculum, heterogeneous age and ability grouping, teaching to different learning styles, and adopting anecdotal and performance-based assessment techniques. The report advocated establishing "nongraded alternatives for grades K-2 for parents who prefer this option" and suggested increasing teacher planning time by using specialists. It also encouraged using flexible scheduling to allow staff development, arranging for staff to share expertise, creating peer coaching pairs, and offering teachers options for study leave.

"It is not prudent to mandate uniform changes 'from the top,' nor all at once," the report states. "Rather, we must respond to the readiness of implementers.... We must remove the organizational barriers that inhibit attempts at change" (Harris 1988).

Individual Schools Respond Differently

It would have been impossible for any school to implement all forty-three recommendations simultaneously. How each site responded depended on the energy and interests of the staff, Harris said. In the case of Westmoreland, both the principal and the primary staff were interested in nongraded primary education, but other schools put energy into other areas.

The Effects of Budget Cuts

"There was a time when we had staff development money," said Harris wistfully, "so we could say, 'This is the direction we're going, you decide when you're ready to come along and we've got staff development money to help you'." Unfortunately, 90 percent of staff development funds have been lost in the last two or three years of budget cuts, so the district's role is currently limited to providing information and encouragement. Fortunately, some schools, like Westmoreland, have obtained help from state grants.

Corvallis: Adopting a Developmentally Appropriate Philosophy

In Corvallis, as in Beaverton, nongraded primary education is just one acceptable way of carrying out district policy. According to Elementary Curriculum Coordinator Mary Johnson, the approach of the Corvallis School

District is to promote a developmentally appropriate philosophy rather than to order specific actions.

"It's one thing to say that we all want to meet the needs of young children in developmentally appropriate ways, and it's another thing to mandate the way that people should do that," said Johnson. "We have tried to educate people and support them in developing their own thoughts about how that can occur."

Elementary Education Study Produces Call for Change

The district appointed a committee to review current practices in elementary schools approximately five years ago. The study committee, which included teachers, administrators, and parents, spent three years reviewing current research on elementary education and visiting other schools. In its final report to the school board in June 1988, the study committee recommended that all district schools adopt developmentally appropriate practices. The school board accepted the committee's recommendation.

During the 1988-89 school year, Johnson explained, the district's ten elementary school principals met to define what they felt were the essential elements of developmentally appropriate practice, "to set down some general parameters within which all schools would operate." The principals produced a list of eight Elements of Developmentally Appropriate Practice. The list included many elements of the nongraded approach, but it did not specifically mention mixed-age grouping.

Meanwhile, the district had allocated money for staff development. Consultants from Portland were brought in to conduct workshops on developmentally appropriate practices. The district also contacted the province of British Columbia, whose pioneering education reform program is described in chapter 4. Educators from the University of Victoria, B.C., were invited to Corvallis to present information on authentic assessment methods and reporting to parents. Several Corvallis staff also attended conferences presented by mixed-age grouping expert Lilian Katz, and they brought information back to share.

School Sites Create Customized Implementation Plans

Elementary school staff were asked to prepare plans showing how their site intended to implement developmentally appropriate practices. Schools were given a great deal of flexibility in how they chose to move toward that goal. The district required schools to begin the process by the 1989-90 school year. Full implementation was expected to take several years.

Staff at some schools, such as Lincoln Elementary School, became convinced that multiage grouping was "the way to go" and immediately began moving in that direction. Lincoln was recently awarded a state grant for piloting nongraded education, along with Eugene's Westmoreland and Beaverton's Beaver Acres. Other schools chose other ways of implementing the district's policy.

Every year each school reports on its progress to the monitoring committee, which is composed of two principals, two teachers, and two parents, and the site presents an updated plan for the following year. "The monitoring committee has been helpful in keeping track of how the schools evolve, because they are doing it in different ways," Johnson said.

Systemic Change Takes Time

Many educators today remember failed attempts at nongraded education made in the sixties and seventies. Johnson is one of those educators. "I learned a lot from that experience about what *not* to do," she said.

Elements that often contributed to those failures included inadequate understanding of what nongraded education involved and insufficient support. The Corvallis School District is fully aware of the magnitude of the change it is currently undertaking, and of the amount of support its teachers will require. Johnson feels the CBAM program described in chapter 1 "has been very beneficial in helping us look at change in a realistic light, and realize that it takes *time* for people to change." The district plans ongoing staff development activities to provide staff with continued assistance as they move through the change process.

"It takes a long time to bring about true systemic change, rather than just imposing something on the surface," Johnson said. Corvallis's endorsement of developmentally appropriate practices is not a sudden move, but rather a continuation of years of steady progress in the same general direction. For example, since the mideighties the district had been working to orient its curriculum toward students' long-term learning process rather than being divided into "little boxes marked 1st, 2nd, and 3rd grade." This previously laid groundwork has made the current change process much easier. A traditional grade-linked curriculum would have presented major obstacles to implementing developmentally appropriate practices.

Johnson stresses the importance of considering curriculum and other interlinked elements when contemplating a change to nongraded education:

> I consider the nongradedness to be only a piece of a much larger picture. All the pieces of that picture ought to be considered in a district, or in a school, before one jumps aboard and tries to bring about these changes. If one isn't looking ahead, and doesn't understand the complexity of the issues, it can be a really unhappy experience.

Chapter 4

State School Systems Make the Transition

Nongraded programs have existed in individual schools or model classrooms for many years. However, the adoption of nongraded primary education by entire states and provinces is a recent development.

As part of comprehensive education reform legislation, the Canadian province of British Columbia mandated universal nongraded primary education to start in fall 1991. The Kentucky Education Reform Act is following in British Columbia's footsteps, with implementation scheduled to start in fall 1992. Oregon's education reform bill requires the exploration of nongraded primary education and may later mandate it. Educators in other states and provinces are closely observing these large-scale pioneering efforts.

British Columbia's Year 2000 Program

When the government of British Columbia established the Sullivan Royal Commission on Education in 1987, it had been almost thirty years since the last major review of the province's educational system. Factors prompting this review included demographic, economic, and technological changes. Concern about high dropout rates had been increasing as employment opportunities for unskilled workers diminished (Ministry of Education 1991a).

The Sullivan Commission's report appeared in August 1988. The following year the provincial government passed legislation incorporating most of the commission's recommendations and targeted $1.4 billion (Canadian) to support the reforms over a ten-year period (Stanley B. Hagen 1991).

Nongraded education was one element of this comprehensive educa-

tion reform package. "The development of the whole child" was defined as the goal of primary education, with growth in emotional, artistic, physical, and intellectual areas considered interrelated and equally important (Ministry of Education undated a). Acceptance of diversity, particularly in terms of multiculturalism, was emphasized, and is even reflected in the Ministry's recent name change. Its full name is now the Ministry of Education and Ministry Responsible for Multiculturalism and Human Rights.

Input Sought from Educators and Citizens

Input from educators and citizens was sought at each stage of the reform process. In gathering information for its original report, the commission "travelled widely throughout the province, and received over 2000 submissions from students, parents, teachers, school administrators, trustees, concerned individuals, groups, organizations, and institutions" (Ministry of Education 1991a).

After the legislation was passed, the proposed curriculum reforms were presented in *Year 2000: A Curriculum and Assessment Framework for the Future* (Hagen). This preliminary document was widely circulated, and responses from educators, parents, and other citizens were taken into account in preparing its successor, the policy document *Year 2000: A Framework for Learning* (Ministry of Education undated b). Nongraded education was scheduled to be implemented at the primary level starting in the 1991-92 school year.

Encouraging Teachers to Explore Nongrading

Janet Mort, executive director of Educational Innovation, heads the division responsible for helping the province's teachers make the transition. "There's a huge research base that says that... you can't make people change, and give them recipes for change," said Mort. "It has to come from inside, from a desire to change and learn." The strategy of the Ministry of Education is based on the assumption that teachers will decide to change if they understand the research base that underlies nongraded primary education, and if they are given time and support to develop their own strategies for implementation.

To introduce teachers to the new program, the Ministry of Education designed a series of workshops and summer institutes and offered them at locations around the province. In addition to informing teachers, these well-attended programs enabled teachers to make personal contacts and form informal networks for exchanging information. The government also offered funding to universities, colleges, and school districts to develop teacher

education programs in remote and rural areas using satellite campuses (Hagen).

School districts were also offered substantial block grants based on the number of primary teachers in the district. *Interaction funds*, the first type of grant, supported any activity that encouraged teachers to share information and plan together, including classroom visits, meetings, and cooperative planning sessions (Ministry of Education 1991b). The second type of grant supported *lead schools*. This money enabled districts to identify schools or classrooms already moving in the desired direction. These funds also helped districts to direct teachers to locations where they could observe elements of nongraded education in practice. These two activities were supported for three years before the scheduled start of implementation (Ministry of Education 1991b).

The third type of grant, said Mort, documented the implementation process in text and on videotape. The documentation provided examples "of what worked, of what didn't work, of their frustrations, of their excitement; examples of how the funding was used, so that others who are starting in have that material available to them." It also captured parents' original concerns and fears as well as portraying how their feelings changed as their children moved into the program.

Parent Outreach Given High Priority

Outreach to parents has been a major concern at all stages of the transition. "Parents have to feel secure and safe, that we're not experimenting on their children," said Mort. Parents need to have confidence in the schools' knowledge of the learning process in general and of their children's learning. They also need to have that knowledge themselves. Recognizing the importance of this, the Ministry gave every district a grant for "parent partnerships... to find ways to get parents involved in talking about and understanding the change."

The Ministry has produced a number of publications to explain the school reforms to parents. "Children in the Primary Years... A Time of Wonder" (Ministry of Education undated a) is a liberally illustrated full-color, glossy brochure that outlines the philosophy, goals, and curriculum of the new primary program. *Changes in Education: A Guide for Parents* is (Ministry of Education 1991a) a twenty-page booklet presenting an overview of the changes from kindergarten through high school graduation. It was prepared with considerable input from the province's Parent Advisory Councils, and it was actually written by parents. "We helped them understand the concepts and they helped us write it in terms they thought parents would understand," Mort explains.

Assessing their children's progress is a major concern of parents. *Supporting Learning: Understanding and Assessing the Progress of Children in the Primary Program* (Ministry of Education 1991c) was produced as a resource for both parents and teachers. This sixty-two page document suggests ways parents can support their children's development in artistic, emotional, social, physical, and intellectual areas, in addition to providing charts of "widely held expectations" for normal development in each of these areas. "Parents have just gobbled it up," said Mort. "We find it's really engaging parents in the learning process." The document also contains a special section on progress in reading, writing, and mathematics, which was developed in response to parent requests (Ministry of Education 1991c).

Framework for Primary Program Review

Reviewing the innovations and evaluating their effectiveness is another key component of the reform package. The Ministry has prepared a plan for evaluating the primary program, which will include interviews and questionnaire surveys of teachers, administrators, students, parents, and other citizens, as well as onsite observations and analyses of documents.

Information on this evaluation plan, which will be conducted by the Ministry's Program and Evaluation Branch, has been published under the title *Framework for Primary Program Review* (Ministry of Education 1991b).

An Optimistic Outlook

During the 1991-92 school year, the first year of implementation, schools were not required to be totally nongraded, but were expected to begin the process. Mort says an estimated 50 percent of the classrooms in the province are "very much" implementing nongrading, while the other 50 percent range in readiness. Teachers have been encouraged to take their time, says Mort, "to stick with what they're secure with and then try something new from the primary program."

According to Mort, research shows that "if you have 10 percent of any group of people in an organization making change, you are reaching critical mass." If the province's figure of 50 percent is accurate, she feels the program is doing very well. The Ministry expects to achieve full implementation by 1999.

"We're not rushing headlong into this," Mort emphasizes; "it's a carefully calculated plan. We're adjusting and monitoring and refining as things change, because no one's ever done this before, but we're feeling very optimistic."

British Columbia is sharing information on its trail-blazing reform with a number of interested states, including Kentucky, Nebraska, and Delaware. According to Carol Lauritzen, professor of education at Eastern Oregon State University and a member of Oregon's Task Force on Nongraded Primary Education, the province has "put together excellent documentation to help other people take the best of what they know."

The Kentucky Education Reform Act

The Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA) of 1990 was partly inspired by the same economic and technological factors that prompted change in British Columbia. In the words of Kentucky Commissioner of Education Thomas C. Boysen, KERA "might also be called the Kentucky Economic Revitalization Act. The public and the political leadership are investing in schools as a way to get the commonwealth's economy moving up in the pack of states and countries competing for industries and jobs" (Boysen 1991b).

Education reform in Kentucky was also motivated by the need to correct serious problems. In 1985 the Kentucky Supreme Court had declared the state's educational system unconstitutional because schools in rich and poor districts were so unequally funded (Jim Parks 1990). In addition, school hiring practices had fallen under the influence of nepotism and favoritism in some areas of the state (Wallace G. Wilkinson 1990).

The reform act established new funding formulas to equalize per student spending across the state (Parks) and restructured local school management to eliminate abuses. But the Kentucky General Assembly went far beyond rectifying problems to create "the most comprehensive and groundbreaking education reform act in the country" (Kent C. Nelson 1990).

The Primary Program

Early childhood programs received special emphasis in the legislation. Prominent among these is the Primary Program, which children will attend from the time they enter school until they are prepared to enter the fourth grade. The new primary program is defined by seven Critical Attributes: "developmentally appropriate educational practices, multi-age, multi-ability classrooms, continuous progress, authentic assessment, qualitative reporting methods, professional teamwork, and positive parent involvement" (Kentucky Department of Education undated a).

New performance-based types of assessment will be used to assess children's progress in relation to the designated fourth-grade outcomes, rather than in relation to classmates who are the same age or who have been

in school the same length of time. Students who need extra time to complete primary school in four years must be provided with "extended school services.... in the form of extended day, extended week or extended year programs" (Kentucky Department of Education undated a). Teachers must be given additional noninstructional time to use for planning, staff development, parent outreach, and school council work (Wilkinson).

This description certainly fits the definition of nongraded primary education used in this Bulletin. However, although the program was referred to as "Ungraded Primary" at an earlier stage, the Kentucky Department of Education has currently stopped using the term because it "incited negative reactions in teachers and parents" (Abbie Robinson-Armstrong, Kentucky Department of Education memorandum, March 27, 1992)

After the reform bill passed in April 1990, the Kentucky Department of Education (KDE) began by reviewing the literature and searching for schools with nongraded primary programs. Studying these existing programs helped department staff identify the elements they felt should be incorporated into the state program. At the end of the summer, Kentucky learned of a similar process taking place in British Columbia and discovered their nongraded primary plans shared many common features. "As we began comparing notes... about good programming for primary school, we were affirmed in our findings!" (Kentucky Department of Education undated a).

One year further along in the transition process, British Columbia became a helpful resource for Kentucky. The province willingly shared information, advice, and text and video documents with the state.

Change: A Process, Not an Event

The mandated changes aroused fear and anxiety among teachers and administrators unfamiliar with nongrading. "We have had a very traditional school system," explained John Thompson, director of policy services for the Kentucky School Boards Association. "And now we've been told, in one fell swoop, that everything we've been doing is wrong."

Abbie Robinson-Armstrong, director of Kentucky's Division of Early Childhood, describes some aspects of the traditional elementary system in more detail.

Teachers were typically given highly prescriptive, "teacher-proof" manuals that accompanied standardized basal readers and textbooks. "The teacher was told exactly what to say, given lists of questions to ask, and told by publishers and administrators that they must not vary from these procedures" (Robinson-Armstrong). Changing from this to the envisioned new primary program will require Kentucky teachers to make a truly gargantuan leap.

Dealing with people's misgivings about the change is a crucial element in Kentucky's transition process. "Ownership will be essential," reads the first version of the program description. "Teachers and administrators will not change simply by being told to change.... Change is gradual and continuous, and occurs only with understanding, acceptance, and support" (Kentucky Department of Education undated a).

The plan Kentucky developed allows for differences in readiness to change and rate of progress, both among individual staff and among school sites. "Diversity among teachers, as well as that among children, must be acknowledged and accepted.... *Each teacher will be somewhere on the continuum of change and should be supported* (emphasis in original)" (Kentucky Department of Education undated a).

The Department of Education divided the transition process into three stages: Exploration, Orientation, and Implementation. Each school was urged to include parent representatives in this process from the very beginning.

1990-91: Exploration

The goal of the exploration year was to build awareness and understanding. In May, June, and August 1990, the Department of Education invited elementary schools to send key staff to regional meetings. Meanwhile, preparations were under way for the first major statewide event, explained Joanne Burke, primary school consultant in the Office of Learning Programs Development.

Primary Institute I took place in Louisville in October 1990. The state invited Robert Anderson, coauthor of *The Non-graded Elementary School*, to be the keynote speaker, and brought in out-of-state experts to present workshops and orientation sessions on the Critical Attributes. Elementary schools were invited to select teams to attend the institute, preferably including parent representatives. Districts were asked to fund the teams' attendance.

The state also funded sixteen staff development sites during the 1990-91 school year. KDE staff met on a monthly basis with school district representatives, who read and researched extensively and visited resource schools outside Kentucky. In return for state support, Burke explains, the staff development sites were to "showcase" what they learned at the second state-sponsored Primary Institute.

KDE disseminated the lists of identified resource schools and experts, began planning a public awareness campaign, and produced informational brochures aimed at parents. It encouraged districts to form local study groups, fund staff visits to resource schools, schedule meetings with parents, and purchase and distribute the brochures.

The state also offered professional development grants to *training consortia* composed of two or more school districts. Exploration-year grants were to be used for planning coordinated training programs for staff of the member districts; subsequent grants would support carrying out the programs (Wilkinson). For example, a consortium of twenty-two school districts arranged for Eastern Kentucky University to supply staff training (Deborah L. Cohen 1991).

Primary Institute II, held in June 1991, was open to all Kentucky elementary teachers. The state brought in nationally and internationally known speakers to augment the workshops presented by the staff development sites. The event was a success for third-grade teacher Fonda S. Crawford. Initially "scared to death" about the proposed changes, she reported feeling "in a much better mood" after attending the institute (Cohen).

In total, the state spent $400,000 on training programs during the exploration year (Cohen).

1991-92: Orientation

Preparing for change was the focus of the orientation year. Intensive planning and staff development were to proceed at all levels, as an extensive public awareness campaign continued. By spring 1992, each building was required to have developed a written action plan showing how it would implement the primary program, addressing all the Critical Attributes. The plan could extend over a two- or three-year period, but full implementation was required by the 1995-96 school year, when the new performance-based standards were scheduled to be in place.

Considerable variation is expected, and allowed, among schools. The Department of Education presents three sample action plans for schools starting in different places, showing alternative ways of moving to implement the Critical Attributes. "Each program is different in its own way within the framework of the primary program. There will be many other variations.... There may even be different techniques happening within the same building" (Kentucky Department of Education undated a).

In addition to making staff development resources available, the state gave fourteen schools grants for pilot programs. In return for state support, pilots were to open themselves to observers from other schools after the first of the year. Burke points out that many additional schools have begun pilot programs on their own.

Primary Institute III, which is being planned for June 1992, will showcase the fourteen pilot programs and continue to explore the Critical Attributes.

1992-93: Implementation

Schools are not expected to have totally transformed themselves by fall 1992, but implementation must begin. "All schools must address all Critical Attributes, in some way, for all children K-3," Burke stressed. The act originally set a deadline of fall 1995 for full implementation of the Critical Attributes in all elementary schools. However, a recent amendment moved the deadline up to fall 1993. Buildings will be held responsible for implementing the action plans they developed (Kentucky Department of Education undated a).

School-Based Decision-Making

The local choice and responsibility allowed—no, demanded—by the implementation plan is a startling change for a state with a history of top-down educational administration, and some Kentucky school staff are finding the abrupt change hard to adjust to. According to Associate Commissioner Linda Hargan, "The most difficult thing for [schools] to understand is that there is not one right way to do this" (Cohen).

Teachers, administrators, and parents now have the option—and soon will have the duty—of becoming personally involved in the decision-making process. From the effective date of the reform bill, school-based decision-making was permitted for any school in which two-thirds of the faculty voted for it; by the 1991-92 school year, each district was *required* to have at least one school doing so. By 1996, schools will be required to use it, "unless two thirds of the faculty seek a waiver from the requirement and the school meets or exceeds the performance goals set by the Department of Education" (Wilkinson).

School-based decision-making requires the creation of a *school council* consisting of "the principal or head teacher, three teachers elected by their peers and two parents selected by the largest parent organization at the school" (Wilkinson). School councils will make decisions regarding staffing, curriculum, scheduling, discipline, and other aspects of school functioning.

Changes Inspire Excitement and Frustration

"I think half the teaching force is really involved and excited about the change," said Renee Morgan, assistant director of programs for human and civil rights for the Kentucky Education Association, the teacher union. However, Morgan has also seen much teacher frustration due to inadequate information and training. In response to this perceived need, Morgan has prepared a training module that she presents on request to member groups.

However, this is not affiliated with the Department of Education's official training programs.

Morgan and Thompson both believe the effective functioning of the Kentucky Department of Education has been hampered by its recent total restructuring. The reform act ordered "the abolition of all state Department of Education jobs" at the end of 1990 to enable the new commissioner to "redesign and restaff the department" (Wilkinson). "They totally demolished our state department and it took a year to put it back together," says Thompson.

Robinson-Armstrong describes the tremendous demands the department is attempting to meet.

> This shift requires a great deal more teacher *time* to gather materials and to plan projects and theme-centered units than when they were only expected to pick up a teacher's manual and read verbatim from it. Not only does it require more time, but also more *knowledge about child development, integrated curriculum, and instructional strategies*. Many teachers *do not* currently possess the level of expertise to enable them to design successfully their own integrated curriculum. [As a result,] we have been inundated with requests from school districts to provide a great deal of inservice on appropriate methods of instruction.

Behind Kentucky's positive steps to train, support, and encourage teachers, there hangs the threat of negative consequences. Schools that do not meet threshold levels of improvement within a designated timeframe may be declared "in crisis" and their entire certified staff placed on probation (Wilkinson). While this KERA provision may be necessary, teachers not yet fully trained or comfortable with the nongraded approach can't be faulted for feeling anxious.

The goals of the Kentucky Education Reform Act are impressive and laudable. At the same time, it is to be hoped that teachers won't be pressed to change faster than they are able. "My only fear is that we'll expect too much too quickly and be too critical," says Cindy Heine, associate executive director of the Pritchard Committee for Academic Excellence (Cohen). It is worth noting that British Columbia, which began implementation a year ahead of Kentucky, does not expect full implementation until 1999—six years after Kentucky's target date.

The Oregon Educational Act for the 21st Century

Oregon's House Bill 3565, also known as the Katz bill after sponsor Vera Katz, shares many elements with the education reform legislation of British Columbia and Kentucky. Its declared goal of having "the best edu-

cated citizens in the nation by the year 2000 and a work force equal to any in the world by the year 2010" (Oregon State Legislature 1991) has a familiar ring.

While not as revolutionary as the Kentucky Education Reform Act, the 1991 bill calls for major restructuring of Oregon's school system. "Oregon has taken a pioneering step, and America will be watching and learning," U.S. Secretary of Education Lamar Alexander said of the act (Oregon Department of Education 1991a).

An early draft of the bill would have mandated nongraded education at the primary level. The final version requires the Oregon Department of Education to provide models for developmentally appropriate nongraded primary programs to school districts by the 1992 school year. The State Board of Education is to report to the 1993 session of the legislature on "the feasibility of all school districts implementing nongraded primary programs" (Oregon State Legislature). In the opinion of David Wright, member of the Non-Graded Primary Task Force, the state may not actually mandate nongraded primary education, but will probably at least promote it.

Creating Task Forces

One of the first steps taken by the Department of Education was the formation of task forces to study components of the reform bill and design processes for implementing it (Oregon Department of Education 1991b). Department of Education Specialist Shirley Gidley described this process.

After the bill's passage, State School Superintendent Norma Paulus and Assistant Superintendent Joyce Reinke began touring the state to explain the bill at public meetings. At these meetings they announced the impending formation of the task forces and encouraged interested citizens to contact the Department of Education, specifying their particular area of interest. A database of over one thousand names was compiled from these responses.

From this database and other recommendations, the Department of Education selected task force appointees. Selection criteria included expertise, geographic representation, and varied perspectives. Care was taken to include individuals from large and small communities, parents, businesspersons, teachers, and other school staff. Most task forces include representatives of higher education.

The Non-Graded Primary Task Force consists of sixteen citizens and five employees of the Department of Education. Gidley, task force cochair, described the role of department staff as simply assisting task force members in preparing the report for the legislature. They are the ones with the expertise, she said.

Task force member Carol Lauritzen, professor of education at Eastern Oregon State College, has been impressed by the quality of her fellow task force members and by the partnership approach of the Department of Education. "It wasn't, 'OK, here's what we want done, now you guys go out and do it'.... It was 'Help us construct the best that we can construct.' And I think that's such a strong affirmation that they believe in the value of the people who are professionals in the state."

Task Force: Focus on Preservice Training

At the first meeting of the Non-Graded Primary Task Force in December 1991, each member agreed to study one subtopic and report on it during the next task force meeting in March 1992. Lauritzen's assigned area is preservice teacher training. She will investigate whether teacher education programs currently available in the state adequately prepare prospective teachers to use the nongraded approach.

Lauritzen plans to use a three-pronged approach in examining the question. First, she is going to contact Oregon professionals in the field of teacher education and obtain their views. Second, she will review the research base, paying special attention to literature on teacher preparation that appeared during the sixties and seventies, when nongrading was in vogue. Her third step will be to examine the recommendations for developmentally appropriate practice and determine their implications for teacher preparation.

Lauritzen thinks understanding children's developmental stages may be more important than mastering specific instructional strategies. Preparing future primary teachers to teach in nongraded programs may simply require a change in emphasis rather than the creation of totally new programs. However, she emphasizes that she is still "in the initial stages of formulating the question."

Funding Model Programs

Like British Columbia and Kentucky, Oregon views schools that are already exploring nongrading as resources. Ten elementary schools of varying sizes in communities around the state have been awarded $5,000 and $10,000 grants to further develop nongraded programs as models (Oregon Department of Education 1991b).

The Oregon Department of Education will study the implementation process in these schools, said Gidley, noting where they run into "rough spots" and what successful elements may be replicated elsewhere. Then, taking into account expense and implications for implementation, the department will recommend models to the 1993 session of the legislature. Differ-

ent configurations will be appropriate for different sites, Gidley emphasized, and ultimately sites should be involved in deciding what works best for them.

Gidley pointed out that $10,000 per school site really doesn't go very far; hiring substitutes to release teachers for training is expensive. "I'm sure this is just a drop in the bucket compared to the time people will really be putting in.... But if we waited for all the funding we need to be available, we would wait forever."

Long-Term Trends Came Together in 1991

The 1991 reform bill was the culmination of nationwide trends that have been developing since the eighties, Gidley said. The combination of legislation and grassroots support creates more favorable circumstances for nongrading than existed in the past.

Several issues that hampered previous attempts at nongrading are addressed in the bill. It specifically states that changes cannot be mandated without adequate funding. Districts proposing to use "innovative instructional materials" can get waivers excusing them from purchasing standard materials such as textbooks (Oregon Department of Education 1991a). The school year will be expanded, but additional days won't necessarily be student contact days, said Gidley; some of the extra time may be used for staff development and collaborative planning.

In addition to the ten official pilot programs, many districts are exploring nongrading without state support. Many schools are interested in or already implementing nongraded primary programs; some have contacted British Columbia and sent staff to visit schools in the province. The Confederation of Oregon School Administrators has presented workshops for administrators. A great deal of "networking" is going on among both organizations and individuals. "This is coming from the grass roots," Gidley asserted.

Chapter 5

Implications for School Boards

"The local school board is a creature of the legislature and has the power, duty, and authority given it by the legislature," stated Christopher Dudley, executive director of the Oregon School Boards Association. "So if the state says you will implement nongrading, you will do so."

Beyond this basic legal responsibility, however, school boards have a wide range of options for action with regard to nongraded education. They can adopt a passive role, doing only what the state requires. Or they can choose an active role, assertively promoting state policy or going beyond state requirements to create a district policy encouraging nongrading.

Kentucky: Implementing State-Mandated Nongrading

The Kentucky Education Reform Act transferred a number of responsibilities previously held by school boards to the new school councils, particularly personnel actions. Some school boards felt at a loss in the wake of these changes, according to Jack Gray, chairman of the Franklin County Board of Education. "They were saying to each other, 'Why do we exist if they're going to run the schools?'"

"But that's not true;" Gray continued, "there are lots of things they can and should do." Boards can do a great deal to encourage schools and facilitate the process of change. On the negative side, said Gray, boards can resist implementing nongraded primary education until the last possible moment.

John Thompson, director of policy services for the Kentucky School Boards Association, agrees with Gray that boards can assist change. Furthermore, Thompson believes board actions are crucial to the success of the

reforms. He lists a number of actions boards must take if nongraded primary education is to succeed.

Supporting Staff Development

Ensuring that teachers receive sufficient training is particularly important, due to the traditional background of most Kentucky teachers. "I think school boards are critical in that matter," said Thomas. "Our state department can't begin to handle the needs of all the districts' training." School boards must make a commitment to provide teachers with ongoing training, "not for one or two days, but for two or three years, with some followup and critique."

Informing the Community

Informing the community about the new primary program is equally crucial. "They just can't assume that the community knows what's going on, because it doesn't. They don't have a *clue*," said Thomas. "And there really is only one vehicle there, the school board, that can get out in the community and see that this gets explained." Thomas suggests sending letters and sponsoring public meetings and question-and-answer sessions, using district teachers to help answer questions once they have been trained. Members of the community will begin to become comfortable with nongrading once they understand what it involves.

Monitoring Progress

Kentucky schools are responsible for preparing action plans appropriate to their specific circumstances. But, as Thomas said, "It's the school board's responsibility to see that whatever gets designed gets done." Boards should demand periodic reports from each school on what has been accomplished and what problems have been encountered, and they should assist schools in evaluating and improving the transition process.

Providing Resources

Finally, and perhaps most critical of all, school boards are responsible for providing the necessary financial support. State funding will support parts of the reform program, but "it's our experience that very seldom are you ever fully funded for anything," said Thomas. Teacher training, publicity, public participation, and other elements necessary to the transition require "money that Kentucky school boards are not used to spending. So you either cut back on the programs or you find more resources."

Oregon: Preparing for a Possible Mandate

The role of school boards is considerably different when, as in the case of Oregon, there is no state mandate. According to Dudley, when the Oregon Educational Act for the 21st Century passed, the major issue for boards was to decide whether they wanted a model nongraded program in their district. School boards in districts currently implementing models are very involved with nongrading; others may or may not be doing anything, since districts are not currently *required* to do anything with respect to nongraded primary education.

However, many districts have chosen to begin exploring nongrading now so they will be prepared if it is mandated later. And, of course, some districts began encouraging nongrading years before the state reform.

Creating and Implementing a District Policy on Nongrading

School boards differ in how active a role they take with respect to nongrading. Gray said that where nongrading is not mandated, school boards have usually taken the initiative in introducing it, by designing a plan and urging district schools to move in the desired direction. However, in many examples in the literature, the initiative has come from groups of interested teachers.

Dudley said board members may "come back from someplace with good ideas" and serve as catalysts, but, in general, a board's role is to approve changes proposed by teaching staff. School boards empower staff interested in nongrading by committing resources to support them, then follow up by overseeing and evaluating the programs. Once a board has approved nongrading, Dudley believes it has a certain amount of responsibility for community and parent outreach, and its efforts can greatly increase the likelihood of success. Educators interviewed unanimously agree that board support is extremely helpful.

Karen Hemmingsen, policy specialist for the Oregon School Boards Association and a member of the Eugene school board, feels strongly that the initiative must come from the school site. In her opinion, a school board that supports nongraded primary education should set general district goals promoting it, then allow individual school sites a great deal of autonomy. On the other hand, if a board objects to nongrading, "they should not allow those curriculum decisions to be made at the buildings."

Hemmingsen acknowledges that a district can try to mandate nongrading. However, she believes the likelihood of success would be

greater in a small district than in a district with as many schools as Corvallis.

"My own personal opinion is that things don't work as well when a school board says, 'This is how you're going to do it, whether you like it or not'," stated Hemmingsen. "I think it's better to set broader goals and let the sites decide what, when, and how they're going to implement."

Hemmingsen agrees that financial support is important. However, she said, "I'm not sure that funding is always the critical component. I think what's more important is the flexibility for an individual building to set its own programs—if they can do that, they're much more likely to find innovative ways to create change even if they don't receive additional funding. This is not to diminish the importance of funding; I just don't think it's the *most* important factor."

Conclusion

"School boards can be obstructionist to change," said Thomas. "They can stand for tradition, what's always been, or they can work to make things better." Research and experience suggest that nongraded primary education may, indeed, be a better way.

Time will reveal how successful Kentucky is in its attempt to mandate nongraded primary education. School boards considering promoting the approach should be aware of the magnitude of the change and should be realistic about the amount of time and resources it will require. Not every board will choose to vigorously encourage nongrading.

Nonetheless, nongraded primary education appears well worth exploring. By supporting school staff who are willing to pioneer, school boards free them to discover if the nongraded approach truly is a better way for *their* school.

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